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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by ActionAid, Italian Association for Women in Development, Católicas Por el Derecho a Decidir, Center for Health and Gender Equity, German Foundation for World Population, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era, Equidad de Género: Ciudadania, Trabajo y Familia, Family Care International, Federation for Women and Family Planning, Fundación para Estudio e Investigación de la Mujer, Interact Worldwide, International Planned Parenthood Federation (Europe region), International Planned Parenthood Federation (Western Hemisphere region), IPAS, Marie Stopes International, Pathfinder International, Program for Appropriate Technology in Health, Swedish Association for Sexuality Education, Vaestoliitto — Family Federation of Finland and World Population Foundation, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement*

1. Millions of women and adolescent girls worldwide face an abysmal sexual and reproductive health situation that threatens their ability to pursue a quality education, gain meaningful employment, enjoy their rights, and participate fully in society. According to the World Health Organization, HIV/AIDS is a leading cause of death and disease in women of reproductive age. Some 215 million women in developing countries who wish to delay or space their pregnancies do not have access to modern contraceptives. An estimated 358,000 women die each year from complications associated with pregnancy and childbirth, with unsafe abortion accounting for 13 per cent of maternal deaths because discriminatory abortion laws restrict access to safe services. Unfortunately, it is women and girls from the poorest countries who are hardest hit by, and least equipped to deal with, HIV and AIDS and lack of access to voluntary family planning, maternal health services, and safe abortion care.

2. One essential yet largely overlooked tool in this struggle to realize women's health and rights is the female condom.

3. Female condoms are the only currently available, effective protection method that prevents both HIV/STIs and pregnancy and is designed for women to initiate. Female condoms are well-liked by women and men from diverse backgrounds. When used consistently and correctly, they are just as efficacious as male condoms in preventing HIV/STIs and pregnancy. Many women deeply value the female condom for giving women a measure of power to take charge of their own protection. For example, women are able to insert the female condom several hours prior to sexual intercourse or to use the female condom as a point of negotiation for safe sex when male partners refuse or avoid using a male condom. Female condoms are also particularly important for women living with HIV, as they provide a female-initiated option to pursue safe sex and prevent HIV transmission, reinfection, or superinfection.

4. When women and girls have the ability to prevent unwanted pregnancies and space their children, they have greater opportunity to finish school, seek employment, and better manage scarce financial and environmental resources. When women and girls are free of sexually transmitted infections or debilitating pregnancy-related conditions like obstetric fistula, they are more able-bodied to perform at work or school and to carry out household responsibilities. But most importantly, when women and adolescent girls have prevention methods like the female condom readily accessible, they have a tool they can use to ultimately help save their own lives.

5. Given the far-reaching impact of HIV, STIs, and unintended pregnancy on women, it is imperative — from a public health, human rights, and moral standpoint — to ensure women have meaningful access to prevention options specifically designed for their use. Despite this urgency, female condoms remain underfunded, largely inaccessible, and underused because of a lack of political will and effective programming. For example, only one female condom was distributed for every 36 women worldwide in 2009. It is a scandal that women — who are at heightened risk of HIV infection for biological, social, political, and structural

* Issued without formal editing.

reasons are often least served by prevention because donors have not prioritized making woman-initiated and controlled options widely available.

6. We urge world leaders to prioritize female condoms in the commitments they have made to achieving universal access to reproductive health (Millennium Development Goal 5b) and universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, and care (United Nations General Assembly Special Session 2001 Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS). Indeed, female condoms are a critical component in fulfilling the objectives of the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals, and the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS. We urge Governments and donors to take the following action steps:

(a) Expand access to female condoms by dramatically increasing funding for their purchase, supply management, distribution, and programme support. Redouble efforts to alleviate high per-unit costs to consumers, such as engaging in bulk purchase agreements and investing in research and development of additional types of female condoms;

(b) Ensure comprehensive, gender-sensitive, rights-based programming to facilitate female condom uptake and sustained use;

(c) Involve civil society, especially women's groups and women living with HIV, in female condom policy and programme decision-making, implementation, and monitoring.

7. Female condoms are essential in stemming new HIV infections and promoting good sexual and reproductive health. They are a key tool in allowing women and adolescent girls to exercise more control over their sexual lives and to pursue education, employment, and other meaningful livelihoods. We must act now to ensure that women and adolescent girls have access to female condoms and education on their use in order to protect themselves and lead healthy and productive lives.